

SERMON FOR SUNDAY 9TH AUGUST 2020 Ordinary 19

READINGS: Genesis 37:1-28; Psalm 105: 1-6, 16-22, 45 & Matthew 14:22-33

“All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” These are the words Leo Tolstoy famously used to begin his novel ‘Anna Karenina’.

There was a program on ABC TV a while back that was called ‘Making Families Happy’. In this program three most unhappy and divided families were helped by a team of elite psychologists to find ways to relate better to each other and thereby become happier. And it worked, they did become happier.

Well, it seems to me that Jacob and his family could have done with their help as it was a most unhappy and divided family. And it would seem to me that the counsellors would do well to concentrate a lot of their efforts on Jacob as his parenting style seems to be a major part of the problem.

For Jacob had foolishly shown great favouritism to his youngest son. His other sons reacted by becoming angry and envious. The green-eyed monster, jealousy, reared its ugly head.

You would think that Jacob should have been aware of the destructiveness and danger of a parent showing favouritism to one child and not to others. After all, he had grown up in a home rent by division and discord. This had been due to his father Isaac favouring his twin Esau, and his mother Rebekah favouring him. They had set the boys up as rivals, so that Jacob and Esau vied and schemed to be the one that received their father’s blessing. Jacob had won, but it was a sour victory as it forced him to flee his home to escape his brother’s wrath; and it wasn’t until many years later that the brothers reconciled. After all that experience you would think that Jacob might have learned a lesson and treated all his eleven sons the same.

But no, Jacob clearly favoured one son against all the others. And the one he favoured was Joseph his only son (at that stage) born to his wife Rachel. He favoured Joseph against all his other sons who had been born to his other wife Leah and to their female slaves Bilhah and Zilpah. Jacob adored Rachel and favoured her against Leah, and he adored Joseph, doted on him, and favoured him against his other sons. As we might well expect, this pattern of favouritism by Jacob led to a lot of unhappiness and division in his family.

This favouritism was most clearly shown in Jacob’s gift to Joseph of a fancy coat far more splendid than anything he had given to any of his other sons. This coat has often been described as a coat of many colours, but probably the most significant thing about it was that it had sleeves. We might think this a bit of a weird distinction, but the reality was that those who undertook physical labour wore sleeveless tunics, as sleeves could get in the way and get entangled. Only those who lived a life of leisure would wear coats with sleeves. This indicates that not only is Joseph being given gifts that his brothers were denied, but also that Jacob was treating them very differently.

Whilst his brothers were working hard tending the flocks, tilling the land, and harvesting the crops, seventeen year old Joseph was swanning around in his fancy clothes watching his brothers work. He was supposed to be helping them, but one wonders how hard he’d be working dressed in his fancy coat.

Furthermore, he was a dobber, a tattletale. When we were young, we despised those we saw as dobbers. We thought them as sanctimonious twerps! It’s clear that Joseph’s brothers shared our view. Joseph gave a bad report of his brothers’ work to his father. We don’t know what it was that they’d done wrong, but as we know, it was not going to endear him to his brothers. In fact, they hated him so much that they couldn’t even talk civilly to him.

This is one seriously divided family, but Jacob seemed oblivious to the harm that his acts of favouritism were causing.

Joseph, it seemed, was also oblivious and arrogant as he recounted to his incredulous family two dreams that he had. A wiser person would have kept these dreams to himself as he would have surely known that they would add heat to an already inflamed situation, but not Joseph.

Joseph told his brothers firstly of a dream in which they were all binding sheaves in a field. Suddenly his sheaf rose and stood upright, then all of his brothers' sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to it. His brothers immediately grasped the significance of the dream. They saw it as signifying that Joseph would rule over them, and they weren't having it, and they hated him even more for telling them that.

Then Joseph told them another dream he'd had in which the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to him. Even his father was unimpressed by the thought that they'd all bow down to Joseph and be ruled by him, and his brothers were further enraged. They saw their brother as an arrogant, spoilt, tattletale, and they hated him with a passion. No doubt they were stirring each other up as they re-counted the ways in which he offended them. The scene was set for an eruption of violence and a family tragedy.

Well, you know the way it happened. Joseph, who apparently was not working, was sent by his father to see what his brothers were up to whilst they were working looking after the family flocks. It looked awfully like his father was employing him to spy on his brothers. No wonder they were unimpressed to see him coming towards them dressed in his fancy coat.

They decide to kill him, but through the intervention of Reuben, they instead throw him into an underground water cistern, and later on sell him into slavery. The idea of selling him rather than killing him came from Judah who was not keen to have blood on his hands.

They then take his fancy coat and smear it with goat's blood and convince their father that Joseph had been killed and eaten by wild animals. Jacob was left distraught and grief stricken, and Joseph's brothers were left guilt ridden and no better off.

With a family like this how could God possibly accomplish anything?

Well, it is a sordid little tale about a truly dysfunctional family, there's no doubt about it. But, as we know, it was not the end. In fact, it was just the beginning of a long saga in which Joseph eventually emerged as the second most powerful man in Egypt who was able to help his family in a time of crisis. Through God's strength and guidance, he was able to forgive his brothers for the evil they did to him, and offer just and compassionate leadership to his adopted country. Before that was able to happen, he suffered much including enslavement, imprisonment and wrongful accusations, but he emerged triumphant and was able to play his part in securing the future of the Israelites.

For the good news of the Joseph saga is that God was able to prevail despite the bad behaviour of so many people. Their behaviour may not have been that which God may have chosen, nor might the pathway to fruition been straightforward nor free from suffering and hardship, but God's dream eventually prevailed.

And therefore, we are reminded that God can prevail despite the bad behaviours and actions of people today.

This is good news in a time when frightening and bad things are happening and dysfunctional people abound (including us at times if we are really honest).

We can't help but be concerned when we see the broken relationship between the USA and China where the leadership of the two most powerful nations on earth issue threats one against the other. And we can't help but be concerned when Australia struggles in maintaining her sovereignty in the face of threats to trade and security, and where India and China are facing each on their border uttering threats of war. And we can't help but be concerned when we see so much war and conflict around the world and so many people fleeing wars as refugees. And we can't help but be concerned when we see the suffering caused by drugs and unemployment and many other problems. And we can't help but be concerned when we see the destruction to our environment. And we can't help but be concerned when we see the outbreaks of the COVID 19 virus, including here in Victoria, and we wonder when it will ever be contained.

We may well struggle to imagine how it might be that any of these, and the other awful things in the world can be changed, and how on earth anything that we might do might make a difference.

But we also need to remember that God's eventual triumph in the story of Jacob and his sons still required a faithful person to act in obedience to God. That person was Joseph, who though flawed, was willing to seek to be courageous and obedient.

So, seeking to be faithful is still important. So, we, although flawed frail people, should not underestimate God's capacity to use us for God's purpose and good in the world. We should pray about these things that concern and frighten us. And we should pray for our leaders that they might have wisdom in making difficult decisions, that they may make the right priorities in allocating finances, that they may be well advised, and that they might prioritise justice and mercy and care for the vulnerable and the weak. And we can write to them and make sure they know what we think and that we are praying for them.

And we should pray for the scientists and those on the frontline risking their lives and health as they nurse infectious patients, and demand that these staff be cared for and supported. And we should act for justice, and be merciful, generous, compassionate and caring to all we meet and try to live out our faith in action. And we should care for our little corner of the earth.

And we also need to remember that although Joseph forgave his brothers, their evil act in selling him into slavery caused him real suffering. Therefore, we cannot justify bad behaviour by saying that God will still be able to triumph. And we can see the harm caused by Jacob's favouritism, and be reminded that we are called to treat each other with fairness.

For we are called to partner with God's grace loving our neighbour as ourselves, and advancing God's love, peace and justice in the world. Amen.

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